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SUBJECT: UNHCR REPORTS PROGRESS ON ROHINGYAS

Classified By: DCM Geeta Pasi, reason para 1.4 d.

¶1. (C) On December 12 UNHCR Resident Representative Pia Pritz-Phiri updated POLOFF on the Rohingya refugee situation.

Pritz-Phiri said she was preparing to sign UNHCR's 2007 sub-agreement with the GOB the following day. She said that in contrast to the 2006 agreement, which was completed only in October 2006, UNHCR had relatively few problems in finalizing the 2007 agreement. She credited the GOB's change in attitude to the diplomatic interventions of the US and other countries as well as personnel changes in the GOB ministry responsible for refugees.

¶2. (C) UNHCR reported that the situation in the camps has "markedly improved" in recent months. Ten new pilot shelters, as well as new latrines and a maternity ward, have been completed. For the first time, residents of the camps are being employed in these camp construction projects. New adult literacy and skills training, and improvements in child education, have begun. In addition, the GOB has reversed policy and agreed to permit other UN agencies and additional non-governmental organizations to work in the camps. Pritz-Phiri noted that UNHCR had established a close and positive working relationship with the new GOB Refugee Relief and Repatriation Coordinator for Cox's Bazar. She said that in October, UNHCR staff held an unprecedented two-day retreat with GOB officials to discuss planning for 2007, helping to pave the way for easy approval of the 2007 sub-agreement.

¶3. (C) In a related development, 13 Rohingya refugees departed on December 13 for resettlement in Canada. According to UNHCR, this is the first time Rohingyas have been resettled in a third country. Pritz-Phiri said that though the number was small, the impact in the camps was significant. Camp protection officers report increased parental interest in sending their children to school, and higher school attendance rates, indicating awareness that education is an important factor for resettlement. She said all these measures are starting to lift conditions in the camps closer to international standards.

¶4. (C) While Pritz-Phiri referred to these developments as "remarkable," she emphasized there is still a long way to go. Camp improvements represent shorter-term relief, but a long-term solution, in the form of repatriation or resettlement, is still elusive. Pritz-Phiri thanked the Embassy for its active engagement on the issue, and requested

that we continue checking in monthly with GOB officials on Rohingyas, saying that this level of USG attention sends an important signal. She also hoped the USG will participate in a UNHCR stakeholders conference on Rohingyas, tentatively scheduled in Geneva for March 2007.

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